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Book Review

English Language Teaching in China: New approaches, Perspectives and Standards

Jun Liu (ed.) 2007, Continuum: London and New York.

Reviewed by Maria Leedham

Current figures suggest that there are between 200 and 400 million users of English in China (Hansen Edwards, 2007). It has been estimated that there are in fact more learners of English in China than there are native English speakers in the entire United States (Taylor, 2002). This book would seem, then, to be a timely addition for the English language teacher who wishes to understand this huge market.

The book is organised into three sections: 'Teaching English around the globe', Learning and assessing communicative competence' and 'Contextualising communicative competence in P.R.China'. However despite the book's title, it is not until chapter 9 (of 19) that the word 'China' appears within a chapter heading. Indeed, the first mention of 'China' in the book – aside from the introduction and a grammatical analysis of the phrase 'Olympic games in Beijing' – comes on page 68, chapter 3. This initially made me feel somewhat bemused since I expected a book called 'ELT in China' to be wholly concerned with precisely that topic.

However, what the book does well is to set ELT in China within a global context of language teaching. We are given the perspective of Chinese teachers in the PRC and shown the issues they are currently engaged with. In chapter one, Liu describes a survey of the preferred teaching methods of around 450 teachers from over 60 countries worldwide. This gives communicative language teaching as the top method used, closely followed by the 'eclectic approach'. The fact that the self-selected respondents were largely native English speakers leads the author to suggest that "the lower preference of the Grammar-Translation Method should be interpreted with caution" (p.24). A chapter by Kramsch picks up on this with a consideration of how different methods co-exist today. Other chapters in section one consider communicative competence in "an e-era" (Murray) and the empowerment of non-native teachers through collaboration with native-speaker colleagues (Liu).

Section two is similarly broad-ranging and worldwide, considering issues from assessment to psycholinguistics (Scovel) and the critical age hypothesis (Liu again). There are perhaps a few too many chapters in the first two-thirds of the book which discuss Hymes' communicative competence, with each new writer feeling the need to define anew terminology such as 'competence' and 'performance'. This is probably due to the provenance of many chapters from the authors' talks at a conference entitled 'Contextualizing communicative competence in English Language Teaching in China' (Shantou University in Southeast Guangdong, 2005).

From my own viewpoint as a British teacher of English to Chinese students the last third of the book is by far the most interesting since it contains data and discussion specific to this group of students. Topics include the teaching of culture-specific gestures in China (Zhao), analysis of Chinese students' 'willingness to communicate' (Peng) and giving anonymous written feedback

(Xiu and Liu). Hansen Edwards writes intriguingly on the concept of ‘English as a Chinese language’, following the work of Jenkins (2000), and Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002). After a discussion of the relevant issues, Hansen Edwards considers technological innovations in pronunciation such as the use of computer programmes and ultrasound equipment before returning to the “fundamental” question of why Chinese students are learning English and thus how we should teach it.

By the end of the book, I have moved from wondering who the target audience is to feeling that this book does quite a good job of including both NNS and NS teachers of English and of placing the teaching of Chinese learners in China within a global context. ‘ELT in China’ covers very different ground to Watkins and Biggs’ 2001 book, which is perhaps more geared towards the teacher of Chinese students in the UK or other native speaker contexts.

The strength of the book for the non-Chinese reader lies in its cultural insights and in the insight offered into current issues in ELT in China, rather than in suggestions for how to teach English to Chinese students outside the PRC. The range of writers included is impressive and the book contains useful end-of-chapter references. Clear chapter outlines, large page numbers and a clear index add to the book’s navigability, making it a useful reference for anyone interested in the area.

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The Reviewer

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